



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2021

A thousand shades of blue and green: Celadon porcelain and its masters in Longquan

Flitsch, Mareile ; Mertens, Anette

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-203608>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Flitsch, Mareile; Mertens, Anette (2021). A thousand shades of blue and green: Celadon porcelain and its masters in Longquan. Newsletter of the Oriental Ceramic Society, (29):72-77.

Switzerland

A thousand shades of blue and green:

Celadon porcelain and its masters in Longquan

Anette Mertens, guest curator, sinologist and ceramist, Berlin

Professor Dr. Mareile Flitsch, sinologist, anthropologist of technology and director of the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich



Fig. 1 Collage: Impressions of the opening ceremony and the exhibition 'Celadon in Focus'. Photos: @Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich; Franca Wohlt, 2019.

In March 2021, the exhibition, *Seladon im Augenmerk: Jadegleiche Porzellane und ihre Meister in Longquan, VR China* (Celadon in Focus: Jade-like porcelains and their masters in Longquan, PR of China) closed at the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich in Switzerland (fig. 1). From May 2021, the exhibition will open at the Museum Five Continents in Munich, Germany. A catalogue was published for the opening, co-authored by Anette Mertens and Mareile Flitsch.

In collaboration with celadon masters from Longquan in eastern China, this academic project provides an introduction to the history, technology and repertoire of this lively craft. It demonstrates what these craftspeople keep in constant focus: their highest esteem for classic celadons, interpreted against collections and shards extracted from the sites of historic kilns (fig. 2). Both are templates for their continual striving for the perfect celadon.

In close dialogue with the celadon masters, the curators provide insights into the artisanal and social skills of celadon production. The aim is mainly

to understand the major shift the masters accomplished in their transition from collective wood kiln firing to privatized modern kilns. Another aim is to understand their objects – crafted within a newly formulated, yet history-bound frame of reference.

The history of celadon production is part of the larger history of ceramics production in an area of eastern China which – due to the availability of local resources – is often called the porcelain triangle. Longquan celadons developed their style during the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127). Their zenith was in developing the famous, qualitatively high, nearly 'unceramic-like' thick jade-like glazes on vessel forms in the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279). The aesthetics and craft perfection of the Song celadons still remains the measure of quality today.

During the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), a peak in quantity was reached with more than 150 kiln sites overall. Many new decoration techniques and forms of mass production for global exports emerged, until production almost expired entirely during the Ming dynasty, due to a range of still-debated reasons.



Fig. 2 Co-curator of the exhibition, Anette Mertens, in conversation with celadon master Li Zhen about finds from his private collection of historical celadon shards, Longquan. VMZ.898.12.009. Photo: Franca Wohlt, 2018.

It was only with the renewed interest of Chinese intellectuals, like Chen Wanli at the beginning of the 20th century, that a cultural and academic rediscovery of the craft took place. The active revival of celadon production gained support from prime minister Zhou Enlai in the initial years of the People's Republic of China. Subsequently, celadon began to be reproduced in nine dragon kilns, which were built to relaunch the production in the State Celadon Factories in Longquan in 1957.

Over the following years a group of young men, including Mao Zhengcong, developed new and increasingly successful celadon production in Longquan. The craft was now back, and in 1959 they managed to set the dining tables at the celebration of the 10th Anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing with fine modern celadon ware. During these decades of state production of celadon, research on porcelain quality was developed, as well as a broad evolution of styles – temporarily also including revolutionary motifs – as large-scale production geared up for new exports. This era ended more or less abruptly, after the launch of economic reforms in the early 1980s, with deindustrialisation in the 1990s and the consequent closure of the state factories.

The celadon craftspeople, who now also included highly skilled women recruited and trained during the first decades of the People's Republic of China, stood facing either a fundamental change of or an end of the craft anew. In the following years, the craft became privatised in the hands of the most capable masters. Furthermore, they coped with a transition in the use of fuel, from wood firing in dragon kilns with tens of thousands of porcelain pieces to, in contrast, new miniature stoves fuelled with gas, which functioned in entirely different ways. This was a major challenge for the porcelain makers, who were formerly organised in 'kiln firing groups'. It was thanks to intense research by people in the Longquan Zhengcong Research Institute and its director, celadon grand master Mao Zhengcong, that this transition was successful. These developments have equally provided ample room for a second phase of modernisation and development, even industrialisation. For example, Longquan masters managed to set the dining tables at the G20 Summit 2016 in Hangzhou. What communities of celadon masters continue to discuss, however, is what is most essential of these: protecting the precious local resources, preserving kiln firing mastership, developing and refining skills of celadon excellence or new firing technologies.



Fig. 3a 丝雨 Siyu (Drizzle). Plum green celadon with thick gold thread crackled glaze; Mao Zhengcong. 22x22x18 cm. VMZ.898.16.011. Photo: Franca Wohlt, 2018.



Fig. 3b



Fig. 4 Traditional 觚 Gu-shaped wine goblet with cantilevered rim. A close-meshed net of light crackles on a soft grey-green glaze covers this classical vessel. Zeng Wenlong, 16x21.5 cm. VMZ 898.16.102. Photo: Franca Wohlt, 2018.

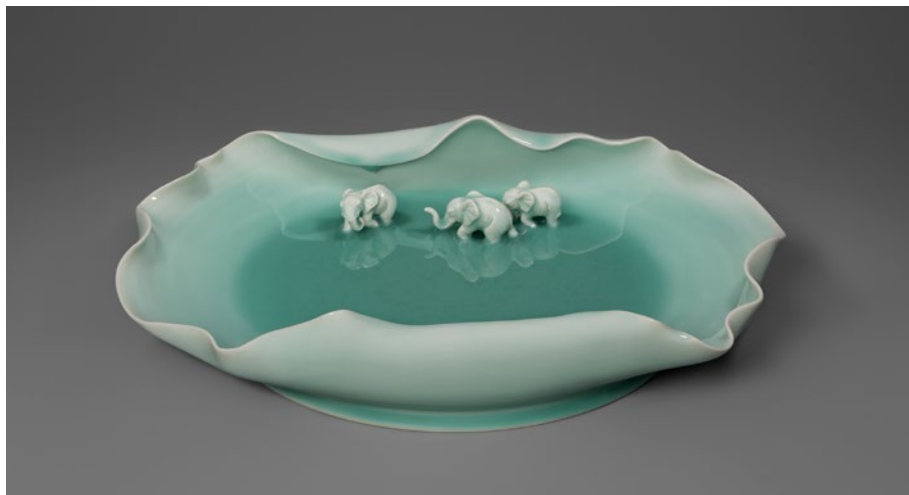


Fig. 5 烟雨江南 Yānyǔ Jiāngnán (Fog and rain in Jiangnan - on the lower reaches of the Yangzi river). Plate with lotus leaf-like curved rim with applied elephants, standing in thick clear celadon glaze as if in deep water. Li Zhen. Ø 40. VMZ.898.16.104. Photo: Franca Wohlt, 2018.

The exhibition is organised in three parts. The first, styled like a craft shop, shows the high impact of raw materials (clays, feldspar, ashes) in combination with operational steps and especially with refined firing techniques (reduction, reoxidation, shock cooling), which produce the highest quality celadons. A documentary film by Marius Mertens from Vienna shows the male and female masters using their diverse operational techniques for the different raw materials. Their fine craftwork and their respective specialisations is immediately striking.

In the second part, 18 self-portraits of active masters, their family members and disciples reveal the social complexity of today's craft. This provides insight into the situation in Longquan and sets the celadon artefacts in the exhibition and publication in relation to certain masters, their repertoire and their status within the community. Each master, by the way, provided the curators with a set of their celadons for display with the goal of making their skills and their frame of reference visible to a European public (figs. 3-6).



Fig. 6a 天地水云间 Tiāndì shuǐyún jiān (In the midst of heaven and earth, waters and clouds, or: The entire world). Vessel with pale blue fenqing glaze, marbling and incised decoration (di-type) in the upper part, motif: clouds. (Also on the back cover) Lower part with dark clay and cracked glaze of the ge-type, symbolising the earth. The vessel combines in one object the characteristics of the di- and ge-celadons. Base with signature of Chen Shaoqing. 22x22x24 cm. VMZ.898.16. 073. Photo: Franca Wohlt, 2018.



Fig. 6b

A corridor towards the main exhibition hall covers the history of celadon production in Longquan, focusing on the transition from wood to gas firing and its consequences. After a scenography of opening a stove door by Master Mao Weijie while using the unique experience of listening to sounds of crackling fire, the visitor then enters into the main exhibition hall with the masters' celadon craftworks. These 88 celadons speak for themselves, in their shades of blue and green, forms, decoration and subtleties. They also reflect a central message of the project: a frame of reference criteria for excellent celadon with which the Longquan masters define quality. It includes the range of raw materials for body and glaze, firing and production techniques, forms and decoration, and also the qualities of sound, haptics, optics, depth of colours, lustre, crackled glazes and also the destination or use of the objects. All define value and beauty in celadon.

The displays are placed within the soft mountain and blue-green forests of Zhejiang, the environment and source of these celadons, with professional photographs by the Berlin photographer, Franca Wohlt. Panels with details concerning the optics of the glaze visualise the Song dynasty context of the historic shards with the clays, the colour nuances of the glazes, the crackle-lines and the surrounding natural landscape of Zhejiang. This locates the objects aesthetically, visually and technically within the settings in which they came into being. The celadons breathe the beauty and the masters' appreciation of this natural environment. Thus, it comes as no surprise that in an interview at the end of the exhibition, celadon master, Li Zhen, himself an owner of a large collection of historic shards, argues for the need to globally protect nature.



ART D'ASIE

PARIS LIVE AUCTION · 9 JUNE
ONLINE AUCTION · 4-25 JUNE

[Find out more](#)

CHRISTIE'S